CASE STUDIES

Quality Audits as a Tool for Quality Improvement in Selected European Higher Education Libraries

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of the 1990s, different types of quality management and evaluation systems have become integrated into higher education institutes throughout Europe due to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This has meant that the university libraries have had to learn how to evaluate their services and improve their quality. Quality audits are one tool that can be used in quality management approaches to assess how well an organization is being managed. This paper describes and benchmarks the use of external and internal auditing in three European academic libraries, i.e. the Medical Library of the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf (Germany), the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Library (Spain) and the University of Eastern Finland Library (Finland). The results reveal the best practices of auditing in these institutions; and recommendations are provided for the further development of library auditing and ways to improve co-operation between libraries.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, the public sector began to modernize its structures and policies by adopting a business approach to become more cost-effective and more citizen-oriented. This new type of public management, not only demands that public services must increase their efficiency but also expects that there will be transparent systems of accountability. This system was incorporated into European higher education, partly in response to the Bologna process. Thus the New Public Management approach impacted on Europe and its library sector; for more information about the New Public Management approach in libraries see Düren (2010).

Universities not only have to deal with many technological, economic and demographic challenges, but also have to become more competitive and to demonstrate their value in rapidly changing and complex scenarios, i.e. they have to show that they can respond appropriately to society's needs and demands. They also need to be – with respect to services, costs, processes etc. – ahead of other information service providers to ensure their existence in the highly competitive information service market (Düren, 2012). Increasingly the allocation of resources is linked to institutional achievements and performance-based contracts are imposed on public-funded universities.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was created to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education throughout Europe. The policy work towards a more harmonized European higher education was accepted by the joint Bologna Declaration in 1999 by the European Ministers of Education. There the main aims were on the other hand to harmonize the basic HE-structures in all the member nations: easily readable and comparable degrees, the implementation of similar undergraduate and graduate programs (i.e. bachelor and masters) and system of credits. At the same time, "the promotion of the European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies" was set as one of the goals of the process (Bologna Declaration, 1999, 4).

Saarinen (2005, 200–201) states that the promotion of a European-wide quality assurance system is central to the Bologna process but the definition of quality of higher education and the tools for the quality assurance are not defined clearly. This is because the impetus in the European quality policy has been "to ease the recognition and comparison of higher education systems and degrees for the purposes of mobility and employability (ibid. 201)" and at the same time the quality of academic work was left more or less to the academic community. In addition, there has been a lot of discussion who actually should lead the HE-policy work in Europe, the member states or the EU (see e.g. Huisman & van der Wende, 2004 and Wächter 2004).

The quality assurance has been done mainly by the member states. As Adel (2009, 103) states: "the most important of the missing elements is what the Europeans call Quality Assurance, a system that includes but extends well beyond accreditation. The argument here is that the execution of qualification frameworks, ECTS, Diploma Supplements and,

ultimately, the mutual recognition of credentials, is itself reinforced by a reference mechanism at the level of institutional and program behavior." At the present, the EU stresses the importance of widening the quality assurance and auditing via using international and professional agencies in order to ensure comparative information about the auditing of the HE institutions (European Union, 2010, 8).

In response, since the early 1990s, European universities have developed new instruments of control to demonstrate that they are meeting all convergent needs and expectations (Kanji, Tambi, & bin, 1999, 147–148). The Bologna process was a crucial impetus to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. In 2000, The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established to promote European co-operation in the field of quality assurance and in 2004, this network became transformed into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

This paper examines the building of the quality systems and auditing of three European academic libraries. The libraries were selected based on the fact that they had all implemented ISO 9001 based quality management systems (QMS) and audited these. As a method, benchmarking is used. Benchmarking is widely used a method in the QMS building. There the aim is to learn from other organizations in order to implement the best practices found during the process and to avoid the pitfalls other organizations have experienced.

QUALITY AUDITING AS A TOOL FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The European universities have needed to provide themselves with quality assurance systems. One tool which can be utilized to demonstrate an improvement in quality is the auditing of the teaching quality and the auditing of the research output and impact. Thus several countries have already integrated quality audits into their higher education system.

Quality auditing is a systematic examination of a quality management system carried out by internal or external quality auditors (Seear, 2010). An audit employs a systematic method for gathering facts or evidence and the auditor has to compare this evidence with the requirements set-down in the quality system, and then present the findings and conclusions in the audit report, that should include not only areas of non-conformance but should also highlight areas of good practice.

Internal audits are used to continue the quality management process in between the external audit. The actual meaning of the internal audits is that they help in improving the library's processes and actions. If internal audits are executed bi-annually, it enables focusing in improving the library's services one at a time. Internal auditors usually come from the same institution so they have the organizational knowledge needed and they also have the point of view of a customer to the library being audited. Thus the feedback from the internal audits is usually more detailed and helps in upgrading the services.

In the external audit, the point of view is usually more focused to the total quality management system, so the comments are at a more general level and give information about the relationship between the university and its library. All the audits are reported and these are published according to the quality manual. The reports are always used in subsequent audits where emphasis is in verifying that the library has performed the corrections suggested by the reports.

One of the challenges when establishing an audit program is to ensure that it is incorporated into the organizational culture not simply as a repetitive performance control mechanism but instead as a tool for evaluating and improving quality. This is, in fact, one of the main challenges; because to be effective quality systems in general – and audits in particular – encounter obstacles such as bureaucracy, tradition, poor communication, lack of a training program or lack of oversight.

Libraries, as information service providers to university communities are not exempt of this obligation: they have to demonstrate their accountability and value, and to support university strategies. Thus

academic libraries which consider quality to be one of their strategic goals (Düren, 2012) could and should use quality audits as one way to ensure that the positive results in the quality management can be highlighted and publicized.

LIBRARIES AND QUALITY AUDITING IMPLEMENTATION

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (http://www.uab.es/english/) was established in 1968. It has its main campus in Bellaterra, located 20 km outside the city of Barcelona, Spain. Teaching and research cover a wide range of disciplines related to experimental sciences, humanities, health sciences, social sciences and technologies. The university community consists of 35,000 undergraduate students, 16,000 post-graduate and doctoral students, 4400 teachers and researchers and 2500 administrative and service staff.

The UAB Library (http://www.uab.es/bib) has eight libraries on the Bellaterra campus as well as four libraries located in the University's extension areas. Library holdings include more than 1,200,000 books and over 63,000 periodical titles with ever expanding access to a continually growing digital library. The library buildings which have an area over 35,000 m^2 are capable of accommodating a total of 4700 readers at any given time. The one hundred and sixty people working in the libraries serve almost four million visitors per year as well helping virtual users.

The UAB Library pioneered the implementation of a quality assurance system based on the ISO 9001 standard and in the year 2000 it became the first Spanish library to obtain an ISO certification. UAB Library has also been involved in other quality assessment initiatives (Balagué, 2009). Now, UAB Library has a long experience on quality audits, both internal and external audits.

An external audit visit is arranged every year. Maintenance audit visits are not carried out with the same intensity and depth than renewal audits that occur every three years. External auditors visit between one third to one half of the libraries every year; i.e. every one of UAB libraries has undergone several external audit visits in the last 12 years. Sometimes, the external auditors are the same as the year before; at other times there are new auditors perhaps performing their first professional auditing visit to a library. However, whether experienced or novice, the auditors seem to approach their task in much the same way. The auditing reports, usually fail to identify non-conformities, but often recognize our strengths and provide advice on our possibilities for improvement.

The last internal audit report underlined some of the strengths of the quality system, such as the objective setting framed in the Library Service Strategic Plan 2011–2014, the improvement and expansion of some of the services thanks to the continuous technological surveillance to improve the available resources, and the high level of involvement of the libraries' personnel in improvement actions. On the other hand, two improvement opportunities were detected, one related to the methodology applied to build some indicators and the other on the convenience of merging into only one document the general policy of the library about complaints and suggestions and the policy about complaints and suggestions on social networks.

Initially the library encountered the first external audit as a professional challenge. Thus, the idea to conduct internal audits became a key way with which they could consolidate the quality system. The annual plan for internal audits foresees a review of all activities that will take place in each of the libraries. It is performed by the audit unit of the University's Office of Planning and Organization and the internal auditor visits are for the most part perceived as providing assistance in determining the ways in which to improve the library's service to clients.

The quality system is evolving and developing. No major changes to routine are needed before or after audits are performed. There is no